

MONTANA/DAKOTAS BLM ACCESS INITIATIVE

SUMMARY:

The changing ownership of private lands and the subsequent blocking of access to public lands has, at times, created a critical access situation in Montana and the Dakotas. At the same time, there is significant community growth, decreasing access to many private lands and increasing demand for access to public lands. Challenges are also being made against existing access.

Over the past few years, our ability to acquire public access to BLM-managed lands has decreased substantially due to the loss of BLM realty positions, a lack of funds, and an increasing workload. Access to public lands is a high priority for the Montana/Dakotas BLM, and we continue to work to find ways to accelerate our ability to create more public access to BLM lands in the three states.

BACKGROUND:

In January 2008, BLM Montana/Dakotas formed a committee to examine access issues. The committee met with various government and non-government organizations and developed the following initial guidance:

To achieve an effective access program, BLM must: 1) utilize a variety of methods to acquire public access including land exchanges, fee acquisition, easements, right-of-way negotiations for reciprocal public access, Block Management, etc.; 2) utilize a number of tools such as BLM staff, BLM retirees, partnerships, contracts, volunteers, land trusts, cooperative agreements with state agencies, and funding sources such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) or the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act funds, etc., to secure public access; and 3) have a BLM staff member dedicated to addressing issues related to access to BLM-managed public lands.

Montana/Dakotas BLM believes it is imperative that we proactively address the issue of public access on BLM lands. Our land use planning efforts identify criteria that can be used to prioritize our resources where they will be most effective. Current staff will use these criteria to be proactive in setting access priorities. However, we anticipate challenges in maintaining a staff position dedicated to addressing issues related to access to BLM-administered lands.

We recognize that the need for public access to public lands is not exclusive to BLM, and continue to work at the local and state levels to secure partnerships with our sister federal agencies, state and local entities, as well as private organizations interested in improving access. In some cases, working closely with agencies managing adjoining lands over a larger landscape may best meet the public's access needs. Some circumstances will demand unique and innovative solutions such as working with third party partners or developing alternative funding strategies. At other times, we may need to devise flexible ways to work with willing sellers to acquire land or easements through outright purchase, land exchange, or donation.

We will also work to identify and retain the existing access we already enjoy as we coordinate with local governments and interest groups. Improving signing to direct the public to accessible public lands is part of taking care of and enjoying the access already secured.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Our partners in local and state governments as well as other federal agencies are concerned about access to public lands—both in maintaining traditional access and in creating new opportunities for the enjoyment of public lands. Private citizens and non-governmental organizations are also vocal about the ability to access public lands for a number of purposes and in a number of ways, especially related to recreation and hunting as well as more traditional development needs.

CONTACTS:

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BILLINGS and POMPEYS PILLAR NATIONAL MONUMENT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY:

The Billings Field Office is preparing a resource management plan (RMP) that will address public lands under its jurisdiction. One environmental impact statement (EIS) will be prepared. Currently, lands within the Billings Field Office, including Pompeys Pillar National Monument, are managed according to the 1984 Billings Resource Area RMP, as amended.

BACKGROUND:

Preparation of an RMP affords many opportunities for collaboration with local, state, federal, and tribal governments and land management agencies, public interest groups, and public land users. Planning issues and management concerns are based on some of the foremost issues currently facing the Billings Field Office. Preliminary planning issues were identified early in the process during the preparation plan for the RMP and were subsequently refined by the interdisciplinary team based on the scoping comments.

The planning issues include: vegetation; wildlife and fisheries; special status species; commercial uses (energy development, livestock grazing, forest products and areas within community wildlife protection plans, rights-of-way and land use authorizations, locatable and saleable minerals, and commercial special recreation permits); recreation management; travel management and access; and special management area designations (including areas of critical environmental concern). Based on the level of interest in travel management and access, the Billings and Pompeys Pillar National Monument RMP will address site-specific travel planning by alternative in 11 travel management areas.

A draft RMP/EIS is scheduled to be available for public comment by late spring 2012. When completed, the Billings and Pompeys Pillar National Monument RMP will guide management for approximately 434,154 acres of federally managed surface and about 1.8 million subsurface (federal mineral estate) acres in Big Horn, Carbon, Golden Valley, Musselshell, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Wheatland and Yellowstone counties. The planning area also includes administration of 4,300 acres of public land inside the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range in Big Horn County, Wyo. The Billings and Pompeys Pillar National Monument RMP will also include the 51 acres of public land designated as a national monument on January 17, 2001.

In October 2007, the Montana State Office approved a preparation plan for the Billings and Pompeys Pillar National Monument RMP. Public scoping was initiated May 15, 2008, and formal scoping ended August 22, 2008; however, public comments will be considered throughout the planning process. Seven public open houses were held across the planning area and about 600 specific comments were provided by agencies and interested parties. In June 2009, the Billings Field Office hosted a series of travel management workshops to gather public comments on our travel route layers (data) and motorized/non-motorized recreation on public lands.

The BLM is working with 15 cooperating agencies on the RMP, including: Carbon, Golden Valley, Wheatland, Musselshell, and Yellowstone counties; Big Horn County, Wyo.; Musselshell Planning Project; Northern Cheyenne Tribe; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana State Historic Preservation Office; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation - Northeastern Land Office and Southern Land Office; Montana Association of Conservation Districts; Bureau of Indian Affairs; and the Bureau of Reclamation. In addition, the Eastern Montana Resource Advisory Council (RAC) has appointed two council members to participate in the planning process and has established two RAC sub-committees to focus on travel management and special designations.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest is moderate to high because the RMP will establish management direction for the field office for the next 10-15 years. There is increased interest in energy development, travel management, and special area designations.

CONTACT:

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HILINE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY:

The BLM is nearing completion of the Draft HiLine Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Draft RMP/EIS). The HiLine RMP will direct the long-term management on about 2.4 million acres of surface and 3.8 million acres of federal mineral estate within eight counties of north central Montana. These lands and minerals are managed by the Havre, Malta, Glasgow, and Great Falls field offices and occur in Valley, Phillips, Blaine, Toole, Liberty, Chouteau, Hill, and Glacier counties.

Key issues addressed in the plan are renewable and traditional energy development; management of solid minerals; soil and vegetation management; land tenure; access; off-highway vehicles; wildlife habitat and special status species; cultural and paleontological resources; special designations and management areas; wildfire and prescribed fire management; and social and economic conditions across the HiLine.

BACKGROUND:

Collaborative planning continues with local, state, federal, and tribal governments and land management agencies. The cooperating agencies assisting in the development of the HiLine RMP include the Bureau of Indian Affairs; Bureau of Reclamation; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Blaine, Phillips and Valley counties; and eight grazing districts.

Five alternatives will be presented and analyzed in the HiLine Draft RMP/EIS which will be distributed to the public for a 90-day comment period in the winter of 2012. Concurrent with the public comment period, the BLM will host public meetings across the HiLine.

To date, we have met with tribal representatives from the Fort Belknap, Rocky Boy's, Fort Peck, Flathead and Blackfeet reservations to discuss the draft RMP/EIS. Additional briefings with tribal governments will be scheduled once the draft RMP/EIS is released to the public.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest will remain high because of management proposals for energy development, special status species including greater sage-grouse, off-highway vehicle use, traditional cultural properties, and special management areas.

The HiLine District recently completed updating its inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics and several areas were determined to have wilderness characteristics. How the BLM proposes to manage these lands will be of great interest to local communities, state recreationists, and national wilderness advocacy groups.

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MILES CITY FIELD OFFICE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN REVISION

SUMMARY:

The Miles City Field Office is revising and combining the Big Dry and Powder River resource management plans (RMPs) into one: the Miles City Field Office RMP. Prior to 1998, the field office operated under two resource areas -- Big Dry and Powder River. The lands in each area are currently managed under their own RMPs.

The Big Dry RMP area consists of about 1.7 million acres of BLM-administered surface acres and 7.6 million acres of BLM-administered mineral resources. It encompasses public lands in 13 counties in eastern Montana: Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan and Wibaux. The Powder River RMP area consists of about 1.1 million surface acres of land and 4.1 million acres of minerals. It includes portions of Custer, Carter, Rosebud and Big Horn counties, and all of Powder River and Treasure counties.

The BLM published a *Federal Register* notice on February 4, 2005, announcing its intent to plan and conduct public scoping for the RMP. A draft EIS/RMP revision will be issued for a 90-day public review, and the final EIS/proposed RMP revision will be issued for a 30-day protest period. The BLM expects to issue the record of decision in the winter of 2013. Work on the RMP was delayed due to the team working on other workload priorities including the Supplement to the Montana Statewide Oil and Gas Environmental Impact Statement and Amendment of the Powder River and Billings Resource Management Plans, oil and gas leasing environmental assessments, and sage-grouse habitat management.

About 200 people attended nine public scoping meetings held throughout southeastern Montana. Identified issues include impacts to water and air from oil and gas exploration and development; making more public lands accessible for recreation; effects of the spread of noxious weeds on open off-highway vehicle use areas; effects of livestock grazing on aquatic habitat and riparian areas; effects of oil and gas development on greater sage-grouse habitat; other mineral development; and livestock grazing.

The cooperating agencies and other collaborators met in April 2006 to develop alternatives for addressing the issues identified during the scoping period. The group developed four alternative "themes" for grouping alternative management actions, including a "local economy" theme.

In May 2009, we sent a newsletter asking those on our mailing list if they were aware of any new concerns or issues since 2005; we received two comments.

The BLM met most recently with collaborators in December of 2010 to gather their input for selection of BLM's "preferred alternative."

Cooperating agencies helping to prepare the plan include: Lower Brule Sioux and Fort Peck tribes; Big Horn, Carter, Custer, Daniels, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Powder River, Richland, Rosebud, Sheridan, and Treasure counties; Carter, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, and Wibaux county conservation districts; Little Beaver Conservation District; Prairie County Cooperative State Grazing District; Montana Department of Environmental Quality; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Environmental Protection Agency; and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

BACKGROUND:

The changes that have taken place in the past 10 to 20 years have resulted in different users and uses of public lands. Issues have emerged relating to potential threatened and endangered species; increased demand for oil and gas; and changes in intensity of use of other resources. The public lands and resources need to be managed consistently throughout the Miles City Field Office area. The RMP will allow the BLM to guide management actions based on current information (changes in policy and guidance), sound criteria, and public input, as well as provide a comprehensive framework for managing and allocating use of the public lands and resources in the Miles City Field Office.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Through the Miles City planning effort, the BLM aims to take a collaborative community-based approach in updating the existing management plan and resource allocations. The new RMP will consider new data, changing resource conditions, changes in the uses of public lands, and BLM planning instruction memoranda and bulletins. The BLM expects that numerous cooperating agencies and collaborators will continue to become involved in this process and will assist in providing a wide variety of data in support of this effort.

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SOUTH DAKOTA RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY:

The BLM is revising the 1986 South Dakota Resource Management Plan (RMP). The RMP addresses management on more than 274,000 surface acres and 1.7 million subsurface acres in South Dakota.

BACKGROUND:

Internal and public scoping identified several issues to be addressed in the revision. These included transportation planning, energy development, forest health, livestock grazing and rangeland health, wildlife, recreation, and land tenure decisions.

Specific items of high interest include concerns about public access to public land; management of travel across lands of mixed surface ownership; interest in recreational management in areas of environmental concern and special recreation management areas; management of areas with high cultural values; and bentonite mining and oil and gas leasing in greater sage-grouse areas. South Dakota is on the eastern edge of the sagebrush biome and interest in sage-grouse and sagebrush obligate species is very high.

The draft RMP/EIS should be available early in 2012.

There have been changes in users and uses of public land in the last 15 to 20 years within South Dakota. The RMP will address the changes in use and incorporate new bureau direction and research findings. The RMP will also address the use of new technologies. The interdisciplinary team is in the final stages of analyzing the environmental impacts for all alternatives.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest is currently moderate but is increasing as the South Dakota Field Office nears completion of the draft RMP/EIS. Overall interest is expected to be moderate to high because the RMP will set the direction for how BLM-administered lands will be managed for the next 10 to 20 years.

Productive discussions have occurred with the RMP cooperating agencies through numerous meetings from 2008 until present. Involvement and interest by the cooperating agencies is likely to remain high throughout the remainder of the RMP process. In general, the cooperating agencies and the Dakotas Resource Advisory Council are supportive of the direction of the RMP at this time. Cooperating agencies are the state of South Dakota and Harding, Pennington, Butte, Custer, Lawrence, and Meade counties.

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UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY:

In December 2008, the Lewistown Field Office issued the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan (RMP). We received two appeals and one request for stay. The stay was denied, and one appeal was withdrawn. The other appeal dealt with a road to private land that BLM inadvertently showed as closed in the transportation plan; the final transportation plan shows the road in question as open.

In June and July 2009, the Montana Wilderness Association and The Wilderness Society/Friends of the Monument/National Trust for Historic Preservation/Oil and Gas Accountability Project each filed a lawsuit. These lawsuits claim the BLM's plan violates the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA), the National Historic Preservation Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), and the Presidential Proclamation establishing the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

In November 2009, Western Watersheds Project, Inc., et al, filed a third lawsuit. This lawsuit claims, among other things, that BLM's decision to exclude grazing as a significant issue for the RMP/EIS is arbitrary and capricious; that BLM's failure to consider and/or manage the Monument to restore cottonwood gallery ecosystems and/or otherwise achieve potential natural community for riparian resources violates NEPA, FLPMA, WSRA, and the Presidential Proclamation; that the failure to consider and/or manage the Monument to reduce or eliminate cattle grazing intensity in riparian areas during hot seasons violates NEPA, FLPMA, WSRA and the Presidential Proclamation; and that BLM failed to consider significant cumulative impacts of grazing on the objects of the Monument. In addition, the lawsuit listed numerous concerns with the Woodhawk grazing permit renewal decision, again citing riparian/livestock issues.

In summary, the groups claim similar deficiencies in the plan: our road density is too high; motorized boats should be removed year-round from a segment of the river; all remote backcountry airstrips should be closed; and that BLM did not address the impacts of grazing in sensitive areas and cottonwood galleries or develop a plan to protect and restore those areas, etc. The plaintiffs eventually consolidated these suits and the venue was changed from Missoula to Great Falls. The BLM provided a copy of the administrative record to all the attorneys involved.

On August 19, 2011, Judge Sam E. Haddon, U.S. District Court-Great Falls ruled in favor of the BLM on all counts and granted the BLM's Motion for Summary Judgment. Many observers interpret this ruling as an endorsement of the management plan's multiple use approach to managing the many public resources found in this monument.

BACKGROUND:

Public participation was a vital element during the preparation of the proposed RMP and will continue to play an important role during implementation of the approved plan.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest in this monument and its management remains very high. The public is largely very supportive of BLM's multiple use approach to public resource management and the BLM looks forward to continued collaboration among all those interested in these important public resources.

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BADGER-TWO MEDICINE APPLICATIONS FOR PERMIT TO DRILL (APDS)

SUMMARY:

The BLM and Forest Service are reviewing a drilling proposal at the former Fina exploratory drilling site in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. Sidney Longwell now holds the lease on which the Fina Oil and Chemical Company first proposed an exploratory well in 1983. The proposed well is located at the northern edge of the Lewis and Clark National Forest in the Hall Creek drainage in an area known as the Badger-Two Medicine.

BACKGROUND:

The BLM decides whether or not to approve drilling applications on federal leases. On national forest land, however, the Forest Service has primary responsibility for surface-related issues while the BLM has primary responsibility for "down hole" issues.

The drilling application for the well site was approved in 1991 after the Forest Service conducted several environmental analyses; an environmental assessment (EA) was completed in 1985 and a final environmental impact statement (EIS) was completed in 1990. The National Wildlife Federation and six other groups sued the Forest Service. The drilling approval and lawsuit were suspended while the Forest Service gathered information and analyzed the cultural and religious significance of the area to Native American tribes. About 90,000 acres of the Badger-Two Medicine were identified as a traditional cultural district (TCD) and as having traditional cultural importance to the Blackfeet Tribe. In January 2002, the keeper of the National Register of Historic Places determined this site as eligible for listing. The proposed drilling site is located roughly two miles north of the current district boundary.

In light of these findings, the Forest Service initiated an environmental review of new information gathered since the original drilling approval and a concurrent National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 review. The environmental review focuses on whether the new information has bearing on the decision to approve the drilling and whether the new information requires a revision, correction, or supplement to the previous EIS. The Section 106 consultation assesses the effects to significant cultural properties and the mitigation needed, if any, to protect the cultural resource values.

The Section 106 consultation drew the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer, Blackfeet Nation, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Glacier National Park, the leaseholder (Longwell), and the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States into the proceedings. It has sparked attention from groups and individuals involved in earlier disputes and legal actions, as well as the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

During consultation, the Blackfeet Tribe and others brought forward information related to the TCD and its boundaries. This information was significant enough to trigger the need for additional data collection by the Forest Service to address the appropriate boundaries for the TCD. This data collection, primarily in the form of ethnographic study, has been completed. The peer-reviewed, final ethnographic report, assisted by the Blackfeet Tribe, has been accepted by the Forest Service. The report recommends that additional lands to the north of the TCD be included in the district. The proposed well site is now within the area proposed for inclusion. The Blackfeet Tribe contracted with the same ethnographer to complete an ethnographic review of the remaining Forest Service lands in the southern portion of the Badger-Two Medicine. That report has also been finalized and recommends inclusion of the lands into the TCD. No formal nomination of any lands to the National Historic Register has taken place.

The Devon Operating Company has a pending APD (a lease formerly held by Chevron) nearby in the Goat Mountain Area that will require a similar review.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest is very high. National organizations are involved, and decisions occasionally get statewide attention. Demonstrations of opposition were staged in Great Falls and Missoula, Mont., following the 1993 decision to approve the APD. U.S. Senator Max Baucus, D-Montana, introduced legislation into the 109th Congress for a permanent withdrawal of the federal minerals in an area inclusive of the Badger-Two Medicine. The president approved the legislation on December 20, 2006, under Public Law 109-432. The legislation does not affect the APD; however, if the leaseholder elects to relinquish the lease, the permanent withdrawal will be enacted.

The Blackfeet Nation does not support oil and gas development in the Badger-Two Medicine area and believes that any development may affect the TCD in ways that cannot be mitigated. Legal action against the Forest Service seems likely on this project. Section 106 requires that the process continue as long as the proposal is active. This process is ongoing.

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DEWEY-BURDOCK, SOUTH DAKOTA URANIUM ISR PROJECT

SUMMARY:

Powertech (USA), Inc. (Powertech) is proposing to recover uranium using in-situ recovery (ISR) methods at the Dewey-Burdock Project, located approximately 13 miles north-northwest of Edgemont, in northern Fall River and southern Custer counties.

BACKGROUND:

On August 10, 2009, Powertech submitted an application to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to obtain a new source material license for construction, operation, aquifer restoration, and decommissioning ISR facilities at the Dewey-Burdock project. Powertech also submitted a plan of operation (POO) to the BLM South Dakota Field Office on October 23, 2009. The applicant proposes using ISR technology to recover uranium and produce yellowcake at the Dewey-Burdock project. Yellowcake is a uranium oxide that is further refined to produce fuel for commercially operated nuclear reactors. The BLM is a cooperating agency while the NRC is the lead agency.

The proposed Dewey-Burdock project is located within the Edgemont Uranium District of the southwest flank of the Black Hills Uplift. Uranium in the Edgemont Uranium District was first discovered in 1951 and mined for a number of years using conventional surface mining methods. In the mid-1970s, the Tennessee Valley Authority drilled approximately 4,000 exploration holes in the Dewey-Burdock area. In the early 1980s, exploration ceased in the area and to date, no uranium mining has resulted from these historic exploration activities.

The project area consists of two contiguous mining units--the Burdock unit and the Dewey satellite unit--encompassing approximately 10,580 acres, mostly on private land. Within the Burdock unit are 240 acres of BLM-administered surface lands. When the surface was patented, the U.S. government reserved 4,220 acres of mineral estate under the Stock-Raising Homestead Act. Powertech maintains the unpatented mining claims associated with the 4,220 acres of federal minerals as well as the unpatented mining claims on the 240 acres of BLM-administered surface lands.

The project would consist of processing facilities and sequentially developed well fields sited on the two contiguous mining units. ISR methods would be employed to extract uranium from sandstone-hosted ore bodies in the Lower Cretaceous Fall River and Lakota formations. The extracted uranium would be loaded onto ion exchange resin beads at both the Burdock central processing plant (CPP) and the Dewey satellite facility. All processing of the uranium-loaded ion exchange resin, including elution, precipitation, drying and packaging of the final yellowcake product, would occur at the Burdock CPP.

Powertech estimates that about 68 acres could be disturbed by surface facilities and infrastructure during the year preceding ISR operations. As well fields are developed and additional wells and structures are constructed over the 17-year life of the project, the estimated potential area of disturbance increases to 108 acres. Depending on the wastewater disposal methodology employed (potential for irrigation on some of the private land), the maximum potential land disturbance area is 463 acres. The Powertech website description of the project can be found at: <http://www.powertechuranium.com/s/DeweyBurdock.asp>.

The BLM and NRC have had several discussions regarding the Dewey-Burdock project. The NRC completed a generic environmental impact statement (GEIS) pertaining to the ISR of uranium in June 2009. In January 2010, the NRC completed an interim draft supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) for the Dewey-Burdock project. BLM personnel have reviewed the interim draft SEIS and provided comments to the NRC. The BLM is currently reviewing the draft SEIS and will provide comments to the NRC in the near future. Ultimately, this document will be utilized to guide the BLM's decision relating to Powertech's POO for the Dewey-Burdock project.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public and tribal interest in the Dewey-Burdock project, especially from the Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation, is high. Primary concerns focus on groundwater quality restoration following the ISR process. This level may increase when the SEIS is published and released to the public. This project may become the first ISR uranium mine in South Dakota. Because of the project's proximity to the Black Hills and their cultural significance, consultation and collaboration with the tribes will be important. The project will be a source of employment and significant source of revenue for Custer and Fall River counties and the state of South Dakota.

To fulfill the requirements of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the BLM and the NRC will conduct joint consultation activities for the Dewey-Burdock project. On June 7-9, 2011, the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the NRC hosted an information gathering meeting at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Representatives from the BLM, the South Dakota State Preservation Office, and six tribes participated. The meeting involved a discussion of the Dewey-

Burdock project and a request of the tribes to assist in the identification of tribal historic sites, traditional cultural properties, and cultural resources that could be affected by the actions proposed by Powertech. A site visit to the Dewey-Burdock project area was also conducted.

CONTACTS:

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**GOLDEN SUNLIGHT MINE, INC.
5B OPTIMIZATION and ONGOING ACTIVITIES**

SUMMARY:

Golden Sunlight Mine, Inc. (GSM) is a conventional truck and shovel mine which processes gold-bearing ore using facilities located on public and private lands near Whitehall, Mont. GSM has conducted mining and mineral processing activities under Operating Permit No. 00065 since 1975. The mine continues to operate in compliance with all requirements of the BLM and Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

The BLM and Montana DEQ issued a decision in 1998 for expansion of the Golden Sunlight Mine. The associated environmental impact statement (EIS) analyzed a partial pit backfill alternative which was dismissed after DEQ concluded, in part, that it would not be economically feasible. Environmental groups filed suit against DEQ claiming that the partial pit backfill alternative was required by the Montana Metal Mine Reclamation Act.

A 2002 Montana State Court decision required that GSM submit a partial pit backfill plan. GSM submitted this plan to the agencies December 1, 2003. The BLM and DEQ completed a supplemental EIS which fully evaluated the impacts of the proposed partial pit backfill plan in 2007. All backfill alternatives would have resulted in ground and surface water quality degradation/violations. The selected alternative did not backfill the pit but was the most protective of ground and surface waters. The plaintiffs continue to pursue the case in spite of several adverse rulings.

In late 2007 GSM applied for a minor revision/plan amendment to deepen the pit to access deeper ore called the 5B Optimization. Although a small acreage of proposed disturbance is outside the existing disturbance area, this work is within the scope of previous NEPA/MEPA analysis and generally improves environmental performance of the highwalls and waste rock dumps. This proposal would extend the mine life for an additional five to seven years to 2015 and beyond. GSM continues exploration activities for several areas north and south of the main pit.

GSM is continuing to evaluate reprocessing the tailings in the existing reclaimed Impoundment I and shipping the sulfides offsite for use as roaster feed for mine operations in Nevada. This would be a favorable environmental proposal, eliminating a potential source of acid drainage from the site.

BACKGROUND:

GSM mines about ten million tons of rock per year, of which 2.5 million tons are ore; the remainder is waste rock. About 300 million tons of wastes have been placed in waste rock dumps. The ore is milled and processed using a vat cyanide process, and tailings are pumped to lined impoundment II. Impoundment I has been reclaimed, but as noted above, may be removed and reprocessed.

Because the rock at GSM has high potential for "acid rock drainage," effective reclamation is crucial. Extensive research and monitoring of several reclaimed waste dumps and highwalls has helped the GSM and agencies determine which reclamation practices are most effective. Surface water management is an important part of a successful reclamation plan. Managing mine dumps and surface water practices together is aimed at protecting water quality below the mine site. Long-term water treatment is an integral part of the mine plan. GSM has posted a total bond of over \$80 million to cover reclamation and water treatment costs.

The 5 B Optimization will extend the mine life for five to seven years and allow the mine to improve reclamation of several waste rock dumps and the west pit wall. The stripping operations for 5 B Optimization started in 2008 and are continuing, meaning the mill will not be processing ore from the pit until early 2012. GSM has processed offsite ore from several AML sites which has a positive environmental impact. The proposal for the reprocessing of Impoundment I tailings would also have a favorable environmental impact.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest in the mine is high. Golden Sunlight employs more than 150 people and has been an important source of revenue for Jefferson County.

CONTACTS:

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GRAYMONT WESTERN U. S., INC. MINE EXPANSION EIS

SUMMARY:

Graymont Western U.S. Inc (Graymont) will expand its open pit limestone quarry to develop additional limestone reserves. The BLM and DEQ approved Amendment No.12 selecting the preferred Modified Pit Backfill alternative. The Record of Decision was signed October 7, 2010.

BACKGROUND:

Graymont initially submitted its proposal for a mine expansion in February 2006. The EIS was completed in January 2008.

Graymont has operated the Indian Creek Mine and Plant located approximately four miles west of Townsend in the Limestone Hills since 1982. This expansion will be to the south of Graymont's existing permitted operations in the Limestone Hills. It includes approximately 1,300 acres of quarry areas, topsoil salvage areas, haul roads, waste rock placement areas, and concurrent reclamation. All disturbances will be reclaimed. This expansion will extend the life-of-mine for about 50 years.

Graymont mines high-grade limestone from the Mission Canyon Formation of the Mississippian Madison Group. The Mission Canyon Formation forms the highest ridge of the northeast trending Limestone Hills, a small range of Paleozoic rocks located on the southeastern flank of the Elkhorn Mountain Range.

The final environmental impact statement (EIS) was completed in January 2008. It analyzed potential impacts to the Montana National Guard's Limestone Hills Training Range, portions of which are included in the mine area. The EIS also analyzed impacts to geology and minerals; cultural and Native American religious concerns; air quality; paleontology; lands and realty; wildlife, fisheries and aquatic resources; range management; vegetation; soils; visual resources; recreation and wilderness; weeds; social and economic values; environmental justice; and threatened, endangered, candidate, and sensitive resources. Cumulative impacts were considered as well. The most significant environmental impact is the disturbance of 450 acres of mountain mahogany, an important browse species for wintering mule deer. The preferred alternative (Modified Pit Backfill) was added to enhance reclamation for the benefit of mule deer and bighorn sheep.

Approval of the Indian Creek Mine and Plant expansion has resulted in a continuation of mining and milling and the associated jobs. It will benefit the community by providing a limestone resource and enhancing economic stability.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest in the mine is moderate. The most significant environmental impact is the disturbance of 450 acres of mountain mahogany, an important browse species for wintering mule deer. The preferred alternative (Modified Pit Backfill) was added to enhance reclamation for the benefit of mule deer and bighorn sheep.

CONTACTS:

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OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT ON THE FORT BERTHOLD INDIAN RESERVATION

SUMMARY:

A virtual one-stop-shop called the Indian Energy Development Office has been established to address oil and gas development issues on the Fort Berthold Reservation.

BACKGROUND:

In response to a letter dated October 17, 2008, from North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development of Indian Affairs called for a plan to implement a “One-Stop-Shop” on Fort Berthold. The proposed office would include staff from the BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Minerals Management Service, and Office of the Trustee with the stated purpose of providing more direct and timely service to the BIA’s client base. In a January 15, 2009, agreement, Senator Dorgan and DOI Deputy Secretary Scarlett reached a compromise to use technology to set up a virtual one-stop-shop to address development issues on the reservation

For the past several years, there have been 27 producing Indian leases on the reservation with an average of less than one new application for permit to drill (APD) per year. Rising oil prices and the interest in the Bakken/Three Forks play in North Dakota have combined to spur industry interest on Fort Berthold. Subsequent to the two latest lease sales on the reservation and four Indian Mineral Development Agreements (IMDAs), there has been an increase in notices of staking (NOSs) and APDs on Fort Berthold. Currently there are 442 producing leases.

The North Dakota Field Office processed a total of 321 Indian APDs in fiscal years 2008-2010, and the first 8 months of fiscal year 2011. The trend is expected to continue, if not increase. Current APD processing times are typically 45 to 60 days, in contrast to 60 to 120 days two years ago. The BIA is nearing completion of a programmatic environmental assessment (EA) for oil and gas exploration which will address the impacts of exploration and development. With completion of a programmatic EA, approval times are expected to be much less at the field level.

The North Dakota Field Office Division of Minerals is responsible for various aspects of oil and gas development on Fort Berthold. Additional staffing is planned to keep up with anticipated workload demands in the areas of inspection, enforcement, and production accountability. The North Dakota Field Office continues to respond to arising issues and maintains an initial response time to any inquiry within 24 hours. The North Dakota Field Office participates in Office of Natural Resources Revenue’s (ONRR) quarterly outreach meetings and makes a representative available onsite as needed.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

A working group made up of representatives from the BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs, ONRR, Office of Special Trustee for American Indians (OST), Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, and the Indian Energy Development Office has been established to resolve any issues or concerns that may arise. These areas include streamlining the communitization agreement (CA) process to provide more timely distribution of royalty payments; creating efficiencies by clarifying workflow processes for CAs and APDs; and developing joint communication packages to ensure consistent messages are delivered to any one audience.

CONTACT:

Lonny Bagley, North Dakota Field Manager, (701)-227-7703

ZORTMAN AND LANDUSKY MINE RECLAMATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT

SUMMARY:

The bonds posted for reclamation and water treatment at these bankrupt Montana gold mines have not been adequate. The mines cover about 1,200 acres of intermingled private and public lands in the Little Rocky Mountains of Phillips County near the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The reclamation plans for these mines were estimated to cost more than the funding available from the reclamation bonds. With supplemental funding from BLM and the state of Montana, the reclamation earthwork was completed in May 2005. However, there is still a funding shortage to maintain water treatment.

BACKGROUND:

The mine owner/operator, Pegasus Gold Corporation, declared bankruptcy in 1998, and the bonds collected by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) were used to pay for most of the reclamation (\$29.6 million for earthwork and a \$13.8 million water treatment trust fund). The selected reclamation plans from the final SEIS were estimated to cost \$76.9 million for earthwork and water treatment, or approximately \$33.5 million more than was available from the reclamation and water treatment bonds. To date, the BLM has provided more than \$9 million and the DEQ has provided over \$1 million to assist with reclamation and excess water treatment costs. In 2004, the BLM invoked its Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) authority in order to continue site management activities.

The DEQ and BLM are presently managing the site and have conducted reclamation and water treatment activities since 1999. The reclamation earthwork has been completed. Due to efficiencies realized through the competitive bid process and funding provided by BLM's abandoned mine land program and state grants, the shortfall in funding for the reclamation earthwork was eliminated. Therefore, BLM has been able to complete the preferred reclamation alternatives on the public lands.

Another critical item that has been resolved is the funding needed for the long-term water treatment trust fund. The Montana legislature approved a bill last session that established a trust fund to pay for water treatment beyond 2017. This fund is designed to generate enough revenue to fund water treatment indefinitely after year 2017.

The remaining critical issue is the cost of water treatment between now and 2017. The present bond provides \$731,000 annually through 2017. Since 2008, the most pressing issue has been the cost to maintain the site, prevent the release of contaminants, and continue water treatment. These costs are running an estimated \$770,000 per year over the annual bond payment. This annual treatment shortfall will continue until 2018, when the long-term trust fund for water treatment becomes available.

The BLM consulted with the Fort Belknap government on an engineering evaluation/cost analysis (EE/CA) that was completed in September 2006. The EE/CA found that the present capture and treatment systems are optimal and no large-scale changes in water treatment technology are warranted.

One issue of relatively recent concern is contamination due to some iron-rich seeps that occur in Swift Gulch north of the Landusky Mine. The water quality from these seeps has worsened since mine closure in 1998. A water treatment system was put into place in 2009 to increase the pH of the water and allow the contaminants to settle out in a series of ponds constructed adjacent to the creek.

The BLM received funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009 to make major infrastructure improvements at the water treatment plants including construction of a permanent treatment plant in Swift Gulch and to construct a wind turbine for power generation to offset power costs.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Reclamation at the mines is a contentious issue with the Fort Belknap Tribes and state and national environmental groups. The Mineral Policy Center/Earthworks and Montana environmental organizations often cite the Zortman-Landusky mines during debates on mining regulation.

CONTACT:

Peter Bierbach, Abandoned Mine Lands Program Lead, (406) 896-5033

SIGNAL PEAK ENERGY COAL LEASE APPLICATION

SUMMARY:

In March 2008, Signal Peak Energy (SPE) LLC submitted an application to lease federal coal from approximately 2,700 acres in Musselshell County, Mont.

Signal Peak Energy is actively engaged in underground coal mining in Musselshell and Yellowstone counties. The proposed federal coal lease would be applied to the dedicated reserve base of the Bull Mountains Mine No. 1 and would enable the company to fully implement the life of mine plan.

The Bull Mountains Mine No. 1 began production in 1992 through conversion of a surface mine to underground development, and in late 2009, the mine began production from longwall panels. Upon full development of the mine plan, the company anticipates annual production of approximately 10-12 million tons of coal.

Federal coal lease parcels occur within the mining sequence that provides access to large blocks of private coal reserves. Based on projected future coal production, SPE estimates that mine progression will reach the first of the federal coal lease parcels within two years.

BACKGROUND:

The Billings Field Office completed an environmental assessment (EA) in April 2010 to analyze the effects of issuing a coal lease at the Bull Mountains No. 1 Mine. The BLM received several comment letters on the EA. The comment letters focused on the effects of mine-related subsidence and the production of greenhouse gases (GHG) and their effects on global climate, including the effects of transporting and burning the coal to generate power. The EA stated that if the coal is leased and mined, greenhouse gases would be released into the atmosphere. In addition, the EA recognized and discussed in depth the issues relating to climate change. Although the BLM quantified the greenhouse gas emissions at the mine for current and projected operations under the Proposed Action, existing climate projection models and tools are not at a scale sufficient to estimate the potential impacts to the global climate.

The Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Record were issued in April 2011 and subsequently appealed by the Bull Mountain Land Alliance and the Sierra Club. The primary points of appeal are centered on subsidence, air quality, and green house gas emissions. As the appeals work their way through the Interior Board of Land Appeals, the fair market value appraisal of the coal resource will proceed. In the event that the appeal process prevents the timely competitive lease sale of the federal resource, SPE will pursue other avenues to assure that mining continues without interruption. SPE has stated that any delay in approval of the coal lease application or its ability to pass through the federal coal will seriously impact the viability of the mine.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest in the Bull Mountain Mine No. 1 is moderate to high. The mine employs approximately 200 people and is a very important source of revenue for Musselshell County.

CONTACT:

Jim Sparks, Billings Field Manager, (406) 896-5241

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY PROJECT

SUMMARY:

The Blackfoot Challenge, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, is in the final phase of the Blackfoot Community Project. The Blackfoot Community Project is a community-based and locally developed effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands formerly owned by Plum Creek Timber. In September 2003, The Nature Conservancy and Plum Creek reached an agreement on the sale of more than 89,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley. This transaction has since been completed and the lands acquired by The Nature Conservancy are being re-sold into public and private ownership based on this community driven plan.

BACKGROUND:

As of September 2010, approximately 59,200 acres have been sold to public buyers and about 11,000 acres have been sold to private buyers. Of this acreage, the BLM has acquired 11,098 acres using Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding. It is anticipated that the BLM will acquire approximately 1,280 additional acres with additional LWCF funding, which has been requested for fiscal year 2012.

The Blackfoot Challenge, comprised of local landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners, has been working in the Blackfoot Valley for 15 years to coordinate conservation efforts in the watershed. An important consideration in the Blackfoot's diversity and rural character is that large land holdings in the watershed remain intact. Sixty percent is now in public ownership and the remaining 40 percent is made up of primarily large working ranches or large timberland holdings. Fragmentation of private lands by subdivision and development is a threat to wildlife habitat and the traditional agricultural and rural lifestyle of the watershed. Maintaining the rural way of life and protecting the natural resources of the Blackfoot are top priorities for the Blackfoot Challenge.

The Challenge hosted meetings in each participating community in the valley and contacted all private landowners adjacent to the project lands because some had expressed an interest in acquiring additional acreage. Ranchers with grazing leases on Plum Creek lands were also contacted, and they have indicated a critical need to continue to graze these lands. There was a strongly voiced desire to see these leases remain as grazing areas and to go to public ownership, if necessary, in order to continue traditional grazing usage. The desire to maintain intact working ranches is clear.

At public meetings, Blackfoot Valley citizens and landowners expressed strong support for substantial public ownership of these lands to maintain historic public access, traditional grazing leases, and high natural resource values. They also encouraged ownership consolidation by adjacent public landowners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of management activities such as grazing administration, forest management, noxious weed control, and public recreation management.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

The BLM is only one of several public agencies acquiring some of Plum Creek's acreage. Other agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All agencies are active partners in the Blackfoot Challenge and are committed to collaboration and community involvement.

CONTACT:

Rich Torquemada, Missoula Field Manager, (406) 329-3914

EXEMPTION AREA AND FORT MEADE ACEC WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE PROJECTS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The South Dakota Field Office is addressing hazardous fuels buildup in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) in the Exemption Area near Lead and Deadwood, and within the Fort Meade Recreation Area (FMRA) Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) adjacent to Sturgis in northwestern South Dakota.

ISSUES:

The Exemption Area consists of 22,530 acres that were exempted from the Black Hills National Forest due to the complex mineral survey and public land configuration. The BLM administers federal lands (5,220 acres) within the Exemption Area. The rest is private, city, and state-owned land. The Fort Meade Recreation Area ACEC consists of 6,693 acres and is unique and notable for its place in western history. The FMRA is adjacent to the city of Sturgis, the Fort Meade Veterans Administration Compound and Hospital, a national cemetery, Sturgis High School, and private, city, and state-owned lands.

Within the Exemption Area and FMRA are several identified “communities at risk” including Lead, Deadwood, Central City, Pluma, Englewood, Maitland, and Sturgis, as well as numerous rural subdivisions. There are approximately 3,975 acres of BLM-administered forested lands within half a mile of these communities.

In 2003, a Wildland-Urban Interface Plan was completed for the Exemption Area. Implementation began by treating fire containment zones – treatment buffers along existing roads or trails that would provide safe access for fire crews – and removing standing dead trees in the Grizzly Gulch Fire area within half a mile of Deadwood. Work continues to be planned, prioritized, and treatments implemented in coordination and conjunction with the Lawrence County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP).

In 2008, the FMRA ACEC Environmental Assessment was completed. Treatments implemented meet multiple resource objectives that include fire, fuels, wildlife, forestry, recreation, grazing, visual resources, and cultural resources. Treatments are multi-funded and are prioritized by the South Dakota FO staff.

Both mechanical and prescribed fire treatments will continue throughout both these areas to decrease fuel loading, reduce the risk of wildfire, and improve overall forest/rangeland health.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Within the Exemption Area, mechanical treatments began in 2002 around the community of Lead. Mechanical treatments within the FMRA began in 2008. These mechanical projects have been completed utilizing stewardship contracts, timber sale contracts, IDIQ contracts, cooperative agreements, and BLM force account crews. Slash created from treatments has been piled, masticated, and chipped.

To date, the BLM has completed 2,498 acres of mechanical treatments, 1,886 acres of pile burning, and 2,767 acres of broadcast burning within these wildland-urban interface areas. An additional 789 acres of mechanical treatments are currently in progress and should be completed by the end of 2011.

Through the Lawrence and Meade County CWPPs and BLM Community Assistance program, an additional 775 acres of mechanical treatments on private and city-owned property have been completed. Most of these treatments are close to or adjacent to BLM lands within/near the Exemption Area and FMRA.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The planning process as well as the implementation is a collaborative effort among the BLM, Forest Service, South Dakota Division of Forestry, South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression, Lawrence County, Meade County, cities of Lead and Deadwood, Lawrence County Fire Chiefs Association, private landowners, and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

CONTACTS:

Marian Atkins, Field Manager, (605) 892-7001; or Travis Lipp, Fire Management Specialist, (605) 892-7013

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION

SUMMARY:

Sage-grouse conservation in Montana is a multijurisdictional challenge due to highly fragmented land ownership patterns across sage-grouse habitat, making a collaborative approach essential. The BLM plays an important role in managing habitats and partnering with other conservation agencies and groups to apply landscape-scale strategies to sage-grouse conservation. Overall, the BLM works to maintain and enhance areas of existing habitat; conducts planning to balance resource uses and habitat protection; and engages researchers to improve our understanding of our management actions.

BACKGROUND:

Habitat Projects and Partnerships:

The BLM evaluates current grazing practices for opportunities to improve management practices and environmental conditions. In addition, we prioritize allotment management plans and watershed assessments in areas with priority sage-grouse habitat. On fences near leks, we are installing fence markers to reduce the chances of collisions. Additionally, we study evolving science in order to locate new fences in proper areas, remove/renovate problem fences (including removing woven wire), and change the amount and distribution of markers. Many field offices are evaluating and implementing projects to remove conifers that have expanded into sage-brush habitats. These actions will improve tens of thousands of acres of sage grouse habitat across Montana. We also work closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to coordinate its voluntary private land management programs with BLM management, leading to larger scale sage-grouse conservation.

The BLM also participates in three greater sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) (Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow) that were established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* and are led by FWP. The BLM also partners with the NRCS to fund a coordinator position to enhance the function of LWGs and to find new ways to achieve greater sage-grouse conservation across ownerships.

In an effort to minimize habitat loss to wildland fire, the BLM made habitat mapping for wildland fire suppression use a top priority in 2009. Fire and fuels specialists continue to identify opportunities to reduce the threat of wildfire in areas where they can help reduce conifer encroachment and improve connectivity.

The BLM is working with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to ensure that proper mitigation measures are in place to protect sage-grouse and other BLM sensitive species during treatments for grasshoppers. Initial coordination efforts were successful during implementation of projects in eastern Montana during the summer of 2010.

Planning:

The BLM is revising the resource management plans (RMPs) that cover most of the BLM-managed sage-grouse habitat in the three states. This provides an opportunity to update our approaches to sage-grouse conservation. These updated RMPs will guide on-the-ground decisions for habitat conservation and restoration through evaluating three types of areas:

Priority Protection Areas – areas that contain good sage-grouse habitat and other resources and that have limited disturbances. The focus is on entire landscapes, and protections will apply across all habitat.

Restoration Priority Areas – areas that have the potential to have good sage-grouse habitat and other resources but already have existing disturbances (energy development, fire, old fields, etc.). The emphasis within these areas will be to restore the habitat or reduce existing disturbances.

General Habitat Areas – sage-grouse habitat outside the priority areas. Management will maintain habitat for connectivity to ensure genetic transfer and movement.

Common management guidelines for all resource uses will apply to each of these areas, not just for energy development. Results will be monitored and management adapted as applicable. Although BLM may not control enough surface or subsurface to completely maintain desired habitat conditions in some landscapes, the intent of this guidance is to provide enough flexibility to identify and manage habitat areas unique to each field office while still meeting the overall sage-grouse habitat goals. Coordination across field offices, state agencies, and NRCS will be imperative to maintain important sage-grouse areas.

Concurrently, the BLM is engaging in the BLM National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy that provides the structure for transparent interagency and stakeholder collaboration on conservation and habitat restoration. This strategy will put regulatory mechanisms in place to ensure consistency and coordination of objectives across planning boundaries

for long-term, range-wide sage-grouse conservation. Under the planning strategy, the BLM will review its principal, existing regulatory framework for sage-grouse conservation—the land use planning process—to determine the development and implementation of new or revised regulatory mechanisms. This national approach will dovetail with the Montana/Dakotas planning approach by adding to the framework to incorporate regionally-appropriate, science-based conservation measures into BLM land use planning efforts through coordinated, cooperative stakeholder engagement.

Research and Monitoring:

The BLM has contracted the University of Montana (UM) to conduct a population viability analysis (PVA) for the sage-grouse in southeast Montana and the Dakotas. The Buffalo Field Office (BLM WY) is participating in this effort. The PVA will address issues such as the adequacy of the proposed protected areas and what impacts or benefits will be expected by changing resource management for grazing, oil and gas development, power line development, and transportation design.

We have also cooperated with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), University of Montana, Forest Service Genetics Lab, World Wildlife Fund, Audubon Society, and other non-governmental organizations to develop a system to collect sage-grouse feathers from across the state and analyze them for genetic connectivity between the populations. The analysis will be conducted by students at the University of Montana. The data will be analyzed by the university and forest research staff.

The BLM is also conducting two management studies of sage-grouse to detect migration and habitat usage. The first study, in southwestern Montana, involves radio tracking 25 sage-grouse biweekly to find how and when these birds migrate to Idaho for wintering, and where potential conflicts may occur with the development of a proposed major transmission line. The BLM would like to expand this study to use satellite Geographic Positioning System collars for a better examination of habitat use. The second study, in southeastern Montana, involves radio collaring up to 100 birds and monitoring habitat usage in proposed protection areas and identified high importance areas. Most of the radio tracking will be conducted with aerial flights.

The BLM is also cooperating with the UM on a study using satellite GPS collars to track habitat usage of migratory sage-grouse populations. Cooperators include Parks Canada and World Wildlife Fund, and others are considering participation. The graduate student coordinating the project recaptured and outfitted birds with radio collars in the spring of 2010 and will continue trapping, sampling, and monitoring into 2012. Movement data is being collected and identification of movement corridors and habitat characteristics is ongoing.

Yearly lek monitoring and data sharing is a high priority for all offices. Data protocols have been developed with local FWP offices to facilitate information sharing, and the BLM coordinates inventory and monitoring efforts with FWP, industry, and non-governmental organizations.

The BLM will use an adaptive management approach that applies the best available science/information to ensure that the public lands continue to be available for the BLM's multiple uses while conserving greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. These efforts are especially important in light of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "warranted but precluded" decision for sage-grouse which leaves management of the species in the states' hands but highlights the need for conservation and continued cooperative efforts.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

As a good steward of the land, the BLM will continue to focus resources and efforts on conserving sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands. Environmentally responsible management actions towards energy development are intended to preserve sustainable sage-grouse populations. All these efforts will feed into future conservation and restoration opportunities under the director's Sage-Grouse Conservation and Healthy Landscapes programs.

CONTACT:

David Wood, Conservation Biologist (406) 896-5246

HEALTHY AND RESILIENT FORESTS

SUMMARY:

The BLM is working to restore the health and resiliency of our public land forests and to better work with our partners in managing the public's forest lands. Our efforts are focused on providing expedited environmental reviews and full public participation while ensuring that projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. We will continue to promote partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes.

The importance of Montana/Dakotas public domain forests cannot be overstated. These forests provide for a wide array of public benefits from clean water, wildlife habitats, economic commodities, energy, recreational use, carbon storage, and nutrient cycling.

BACKGROUND:

Montana/Dakotas forests have undergone major changes during the last century due to the suppression of wildland fires, low levels of active forest restoration management, and increased insect activity. Frequent low-intensity fires play an important role in promoting and maintaining healthy and resilient forest systems. Natural fires promote natural plant succession cycles.

Today our forests are unnaturally dense, and forest ecosystem health has suffered significantly. When subjected to continued drought and excessive fuel buildup, these forests are vulnerable to unnaturally severe wildland fires. Insect attacks and disease are further stressing our forested systems. This downward spiral includes:

- Widespread forest insect attacks that have moved from natural endemic levels to outbreak proportions across Montana and South Dakota.
 - Mountain pine beetle – ponderosa, lodgepole, whitebark, and limber pines
 - Douglas-fir beetle – Douglas-fir and limited attacks on western larch
 - Balsam fir beetle – sub-alpine fir
 - Spruce budworm – Douglas-fir
- Forest disease appears to be increasing
 - Blister rust –whitebark and limber pines
 - Armillaria root rot - conifers
- Sudden aspen decline – conifer competition along with aspen specific insects/disease is reducing the number and size of the remaining aspen clones

On July 19, 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced through *Federal Register Vol. 76, No. 138* its finding to list *Pinus albicaulis* (Whitebark pine) as warranted for threatened or endangered listing. However, the listing of *Pinus albicaulis* is precluded by higher priority actions to amend the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. The impact to BLM's forest management program due to the listing of *Pinus albicaulis* has not been determined by the Washington Office at this time.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest is high and is expected to remain high as efforts to restore forest health and resiliency on public lands move forward. There is much public support to implement the measures outlined in the current laws and initiatives, but there is also coordinated special interest opposition to some forest management activities.

CONTACT:

William Hensley, Forester, (406) 896-5042

MONTANA FUEL REDUCTION PROJECTS

SUMMARY:

Fires in public forests and on public rangelands now threaten people, communities, and natural resources in ways never before seen in our nation's history. Today's forests contain fuel loads at previously unmatched levels, while highly flammable invasive species now pervade many rangelands. The current fuel situation is a result of decades of fire exclusion policies and other land management actions that altered fire's historic role in shaping plant communities.

The Montana/Dakotas BLM's goal for fiscal year 2011 is to complete 11,000 acres of fuel reduction. These projects decrease risks from catastrophic wildfires on 5,000 acres in wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas and 6,000 acres in non-WUI areas. These projects enhance public safety in the WUI and improve forest and rangeland health.

The challenge to completing our prescribed fire projects is largely weather-related. Periodic spring rains and windy days can minimize the spring burn window, reducing the days available to burn because of early green up. This past year was no exception. Where possible, we took advantage of alternative methods for meeting our objectives, mainly using mechanical methods, but in most cases, the best way to maintain fire-adapted ecosystems is to apply fire to the landscape.

BACKGROUND:

The fuels reduction projects are planned on a landscape level, taking into account other resource management objectives and requirements.

Projects are developed through collaboration with our cooperators and accomplished through partnerships with local, tribal, and state and other federal agencies, as well as with interested stakeholders. We use a combination of contracted and government labor and mechanical and prescribed burning methods.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Stewardship contracting, interagency government agreements, and indefinite delivery-indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contracts have helped in expediting critical fuels treatments in the wildland urban interface.

CONTACT:

Karen Michaud, Fire Management Specialist, (406) 896-2911

KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE

SUMMARY:

New oil and gas pipeline systems are proposed across lands in the Montana and Dakotas to support energy development and transport product to markets. The BLM processes applications and issues authorizations for this type of pipeline under the authority of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, as amended (MLA). MLA right-of-way grants are issued by BLM for oil and gas pipelines crossing BLM's jurisdiction, and when an oil and gas pipeline is proposed to cross the jurisdiction of two or more federal agencies (with the exception of Indian trust lands and lands administered by the National Park Service). Depending on the type of project proposed and the jurisdictions crossed, BLM may be the lead agency and/or lead BLM state for the project and could be the lead, co-lead, or a cooperating agency for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

BACKGROUND:

TransCanada is proposing to construct a 36-inch buried pipeline that will transport crude oil from Canada to the Gulf Coast of Texas. Of the 1,375 miles of new construction in the U.S., the project crosses 32 miles of BLM-administered public land in Montana, as well as Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineer facilities/lands. Because the project crosses an international boundary, the Department of State is the lead federal agency for compliance with NEPA; Montana/Dakotas BLM is a cooperating agency.

A draft environmental impact statement (EIS) was released to the public in April 2010, and a supplemental EIS was released in April 2011, receiving over 278,000 comments. A final EIS is expected to be released in August 2011, with a Record of Decision to follow. The project will require a Presidential permit as it crosses an international boundary between the U.S. and Canada. Montana BLM is the lead state to prepare, issue, and administer the MLA right-of-way grant where it crosses federal land. The Miles City Field Manager has been delegated authority as the Authorized Officer. TransCanada's goal is to meet a 2012 in-service date.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

There is diverse interest ranging from support of developing critical infrastructure to maintain energy supplies to opposition opinions that major pipelines are not needed. Issues revolve around a variety of concerns including route locations, impacts to resources, and in particular, public health and safety. Current issues for BLM Montana/Dakotas revolve around route variations proposed by Montana's Department of Environmental Quality (MTDEQ) that increase the length of the route across public land in exchange for avoiding certain resources. On a broader scale, the July 2011 pipeline rupture spilling into the Yellowstone River near Billings, Mont., at Laurel has heightened interest and concern over the Keystone XL project, which has several major river crossings along the proposed route.

CONTACTS:

Jim Stobaugh, National Project Manager, (775) 861-6478; and Craig Haynes, Montana/Dakotas Lands and Realty Program Lead, (406) 896-5040

MOUNTAIN STATES TRANSMISSION INTERTIE (MSTI)

SUMMARY:

New transmission lines are necessary to support new energy development and transport energy to markets in the West. When transmission is proposed on public lands managed by the BLM in the Montana/Dakotas, the BLM will process the application, and if warranted, issue right of way (ROW) authorization where public lands are crossed. When a proposal crosses multiple jurisdictions, the BLM may be the lead agency, a co-lead with federal or state agencies, or a cooperating agency for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

BACKGROUND:

MSTI is an interstate 500kV alternating current transmission line project proposed by NorthWestern Energy and crossing lands in Montana and Idaho. The project entails a number of components including:

- A transmission line 415-500 miles in length, depending upon the alternative;
- Construction of a new substation near Townsend, Mont.;
- Construction of a new facility adjacent to the existing Mill Creek substation near Anaconda, Mont.;
- Modifications to the existing Midpoint substation near Jerome, Idaho; and
- Ancillary facilities to facilitate operations of the transmission line.

The BLM is the lead federal agency for NEPA compliance and Montana BLM is the lead state for the ROW grant issuance and administration. Federal cooperating agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, Department of Energy, Agricultural Research Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and National Park Service. State agencies involved include the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (co-lead under the Montana Major Facility Siting Act), Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Local governments participating in the process include the counties of Broadwater, Jefferson, Madison, and Beaverhead; the city of Dillon; and the town of Whitehall. The Idaho Office of Energy Resources is also a cooperating agency. Agencies having permitting authority will issue authorizations for segments crossing lands for which they are responsible.

A draft environmental impact statement (EIS), prepared by a third-party contract, is undergoing agency review; however, release to the public has been delayed pending the outcome of a lawsuit and appeal between the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and Jefferson County, Mont. In the meantime, BLM continues work on the EIS as well as a programmatic agreement to resolve adverse effects to cultural resources, consultation with affected Tribes, and development of mitigation plans for species of concern (i.e., sage grouse).

PUBLIC INTEREST:

There is diverse interest ranging from support of developing critical infrastructure versus the opinion that major interstate transmission lines are not needed. Issues revolve around a variety of concerns including route locations (public lands vs. private lands), impacts to resources (wildlife and habitat, cultural resources, visual intrusion), and public health and safety. Public interest in projects is increasing; this includes a desire for more involvement in the process and availability of information about projects.

CONTACTS:

Mark Mackiewicz, National Project Manager, (435) 636-3616; Craig Haynes, Montana/Dakotas Lands and Realty Program Lead, (406) 896-5040.

NOXIOUS WEEDS

SUMMARY:

Noxious weeds continue to be the single largest biological threat to the nation's natural resources. Noxious weeds continue to spread on all lands, reducing natural biodiversity and vegetation production and leading to soil erosion. Noxious weeds infest approximately six percent of BLM lands in Montana.

In 2010, the Montana/Dakotas BLM treated 91,018 acres using integrated weed management (IWM) methods in cooperation with other landowners and managers. We monitored an additional 225,459 acres for weed infestations, and 71,782 acres for the effectiveness of weed management efforts. Due to the long wet spring and exceptionally high river flows, our accomplishments for this year will be somewhat lower than we had planned.

The BLM's weed management program involves cooperative efforts with other federal and state agencies, universities, counties, high school agriculture science classes, and private landowners. There is heavy emphasis on prevention techniques to protect non-infested lands. The BLM in Montana and Dakotas also uses early detection and rapid response to reduce new infestations and to use existing funds in the most cost-efficient manner. The magnitude of our weed program, particularly our cooperative agreements with counties and private cooperators, exceeds specifically earmarked weed funding in our annual budget. Discretionary funding from other programs that benefit from weed management has been used to augment the program, but total funding is still short of what is needed to meet the program needs. The Montana/Dakotas staff have been very active in leveraging funds through Challenge Cost Share and seeking grants such as Pulling Together and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation for additional funding.

The BLM cooperates in prevention and education programs, including producing noxious weed videos, brochures, posters and other materials; certified weed seed free forage programs; biological weed control demonstration sites; IWM tours; and weed workshops. The Montana/Dakotas BLM staff will continue to provide training and technical assistance to various resource and weed management staffs. The BLM supports and incorporates the guidelines in the May 2008 Montana Weed Management Plan in conjunction with other county, state, and federal agencies. The Montana/Dakotas staff also incorporates management direction from national "Partners Against Weeds" strategy, the management plan from the National Invasive Species Council, and the Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic EIS, September 2007.

BACKGROUND:

We are committed to doing the best job we can with available funding and will work cooperatively with our partners to set priorities. Montana/Dakotas BLM is also committed to IWM, which includes prevention, education, awareness, biological agents (insects and plant diseases), cultural practices, chemicals, physical, mechanical, re-vegetation, and the use of domestic animals. To comply with both federal and state law, the BLM will continue to use an IWM approach and encourage all resource management disciplines to participate in active IWM. It is imperative that the BLM and other cooperators continue their efforts or the weed battle will be lost.

Weed management will continue to be a high priority. Our staff has expended considerable effort to apply for, or assist cooperators in applying for, outside source funding. Often these funds have stipulations preventing their use on public lands, which again limits our ability to meet the weed challenge.

The Montana/Dakota staff is working in cooperation with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to increase staff and public awareness of aquatic invasive species. This will move the BLM in the direction of management of all types of invasives on public lands and waters.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Because BLM's weed program is a cooperative effort involving many counties as well as other state and federal agencies, high schools and universities, and private landowners, any reduced capability by one partner adds to the funding or treatment burden on the others. There is a universal concern about the spread of noxious weeds and efforts to control them. Weed management cooperative groups and individuals will continue to petition congressional representatives for assistance with this problem.

CONTACT:

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION--BUTTE FIELD OFFICE STEWARDSHIP AGREEMENT

SUMMARY:

The Butte Field Office is using a stewardship agreement with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) to conduct restoration activities in wildlife habitat across the field office in an integrated fashion with other objectives such as forest and watershed health and fuels reduction.

Stewardship authority, which allows an agency to enter into contracts or agreements with persons and entities to perform services in exchange for goods, was granted to the BLM and U.S. Forest Service in 2003. It will expire on September 30, 2013, unless renewed by congressional action. Several stewardship contracts have been completed within the Montana/Dakotas BLM, but no stewardship agreements were contemplated within the state until 2009 when the RMEF approached several offices in Montana about opportunities available to meet their mission to ensure the future for elk and other wildlife and their habitat.

Development of the agreement entailed coordination across all levels of the organization to develop acceptable language and identify operational processes. Benefits of conducting restoration work under an agreement include the ability to leverage additional dollars through grant opportunities, generate interest from additional partners, and use volunteer labor from interested RMEF chapter members.

BACKGROUND:

The stewardship agreement between RMEF and the Butte Field Office was finalized in September 2009, with funding from wildlife, soil, water and air, and forestry programs. Additional funds were added in 2010 from the Healthy Lands Initiative along with fuels dollars focused in areas that are expected to generate biomass.

In 2009, five units in the Wise River Project area were masticated under a separate independent service contract with a different operator while the BLM negotiated a cooperative agreement with RMEF. On September 28, 2010, the first annual operating plan (AOP) was completed and signed between RMEF and BLM; project work was initiated by a subcontractor under this partnership shortly thereafter. Treatment activities included conifer mastication in grass and shrublands, thinning to improve forest health and diversity, reduction of colonizing conifers from aspen stands and riparian areas, and weed control. Sawlogs (540 tons) and biomass were generated from some of the treatment units to offset service costs. Work completed in 2010 restored 105 acres of grass and shrublands, 156 acres of forest, more than a mile of aspen habitat, and reduced weed infestations on 25 acres.

Work continues on the 2010 AOP. RMEF's contractor began working the week of August 8 in a grassland mastication unit on the westside of the project area. Implementation activity should progress into the early fall. Scheduled work to complete in 2011 is 199 acres of grass and shrubland restoration, 31 acres of savannah restoration, and 121 acres of biomass reduction in forested stands.

The BLM and RMEF may continue to collaborate under this agreement to complete additional stewardship projects in other areas of the Butte Field Office, after the initiation of activities on the Wise River Project.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public interest in this project has been moderate and mostly positive due to treatment of areas with important wildlife habitat and the emphasis on restoring forested habitat and reducing fuels in forest stands near private homes. Under this agreement, the BLM may expand its partnership with RMEF, which could allow funding and other resources to be leveraged to accomplish project work on the ground.

CONTACT:

Scott Haight, Butte Field Manager, (406) 533-7630; or Mary Lou Zimmerman, Forester, (406) 533-7667.

WILD HORSE AND BURRO PROGRAM

SUMMARY:

The primary goals of the Montana/Dakotas' Wild Horse and Burro Program are to manage wild horses in the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range (PMWHR) and conduct adoptions of excess wild horses from the PMWHR. Compliance inspections of adopted wild horses from other Western states also occur throughout the Montana/Dakotas organization.

Montana's only free-roaming wild horses are managed within the PMWHR, about 60 miles south of Billings. Most recent genetic analysis indicates these horses are closely related to light racing and riding breeds with strong indication of colonial Spanish ancestry. The range is managed in partnership with the Forest Service, National Park Service, and BLM. Although portions of the PMWHR were established through a Secretarial order in 1968 and 1969, the area is managed under the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 as amended.

The Pryor Mountain Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) guides management of the range. The Billings Field Office issued it on May 22, 2009, and the Interior Board of Land Appeals affirmed it in January 2010. The HMAP takes a balanced approach to wild horse management while recognizing each agency's authority in wild horse management. The HMAP is designed to preserve Spanish characteristics, maintain genetic diversity, and balance the wild horse population with the resources. The plan calls for numerous water projects, weed control, riparian protections and other improvements in order to protect resources and work towards increasing the appropriate management level (AML) in a legal and responsible manner. Most range improvement projects identified in the plan have been implemented. Other aspects of the HMAP include a comprehensive fertility control program through 2015 designed to stabilize the population. A non-helicopter gather is being proposed for 2012.

BACKGROUND:

The BLM strives to manage the PMWHR primarily for the benefit of wild horses while maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance, preserving multiple use relationships, and complying with other agencies' mandates.

Adoption demand for wild horses is lower than ever before, yet Pryor wild horses are highly sought after and all have been adopted or placed when available.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Wild horse issues attract national and international attention. Local and national interest groups often are very passionate and highly involved with issues surrounding the Pryor Mountain wild horses. Some groups are interested in minimizing any human management while others are primarily concerned with the humane treatment of the horses, the economics of the horse program, or the environmental impacts wild horses have on the range. Success of the wild horse and burro program is highly dependent upon partnerships and volunteer efforts with members of the public, interest groups, and other federal and state agencies.

CONTACT:

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BLM LANDSCAPE APPROACH AND DOI LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION COOPERATIVES

SUMMARY:

Historically, BLM land use policies and authorizations have been driven by national and local considerations with most land use decisions made and implemented at the local field office level. Many resource issues and the effects of management actions often extend across field office, state, or other jurisdictional boundaries. These challenges include managing wildfire; controlling weeds and insect outbreaks; providing for energy development and urban growth; and addressing pervasive impacts from the effects of climate change. The BLM is developing a landscape-scale management approach to better understand these challenges and support balanced stewardship of the diverse natural resources of the public lands.

BACKGROUND:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) are conservation-science partnerships between the Service, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and other federal agencies, states, tribes, non-governmental organizations, universities, and stakeholders within a geographically defined area.

With current ecological understanding and new analytical tools, the BLM will systematically identify landscape-scale, ecologically-based conservation and restoration needs, which will be considered as future resource management objectives are developed.

This Landscape Approach has three major components:

1. **Rapid Ecoregional Assessment (REA):** Rapid ecoregional assessments are collaborative scientist/manager exercises that assemble and synthesize targeted spatial information about an ecoregion. This will help identify areas with high ecological value and potential for change so that managers can make decisions on these priority situations and guide habitat conservation strategies. The focus is on three ecological values: fish, wildlife, and plants of conservation concern; regionally important terrestrial features; and regionally important aquatic features. The risks to these ecological values are evaluated with four change agents: fire, invasive species, development, and climate change.
2. **Formulation of Ecoregional Assessment Initial Responses:** BLM managers and resource specialists will work with assessment scientists and others (e.g., partners, stakeholders) to formulate a regional response or plan of action using information gained during the rapid ecoregional assessment.
3. **Implementation of Ecoregional Initial Responses:** Five types of implementation actions are developed-- Conduct Sub-Assessments; Develop Proposed Resource Management Strategies and Actions; Conduct Needed Planning and Environmental Compliance Activities; Implement Resource Management Strategies and Actions; and/or Carry Out Inventories, Research, Monitoring, and Reporting.

Montana/Dakotas BLM contracted two assessments in 2010 with Scientific American International Corporation (SAIC). The Northwestern Great Plains Assessment covers the eastern two-thirds of Montana and large parts of Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota. This area is a stronghold for greater sage-grouse; contains important migratory bird habitat including the prairie potholes; has a series of important plains communities; and faces threats from energy development, fragmentation, migratory barriers, invasive species, increased fire risk, and climate change.

The Middle Rockies Assessment will cover the western third of Montana and large portions of Wyoming and Idaho. This ecoregion is an important link between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Crown of the Continent. Important dispersal corridors for grizzly bears, lynx, wolverines, wolves, and other sensitive species relying on these forest and valley systems are threatened by endemic insects and diseases which are increasing fire risk and changing the landscape. The assessment will help prioritize areas for conservation and develop management strategies at a landscape scale to create communities that are resilient to change.

This broader perspective will help focus and integrate local management efforts and provide an important foundation for developing coordinated management strategies with partner agencies, stakeholders, and American Indian tribes. Partnerships are critical to addressing landscape issues and engaging in successful resource stewardship where responses need to be planned and implemented across land ownerships.

Montana/Dakotas BLM is also an active participant in two LCCs, the Great Northern LCC and the Plains and Prairie Potholes LCC. Initial efforts focused on creating action plans and assembling the science needs and capacities of the major natural resource agencies and partnerships in the region. These LCCs continue to develop by adding new partners

and continuing work on science needs assessments. Prioritization of capacity, science and other needs is ongoing, and funding will be provided this year for some project work. In addition, the information gathered will help guide LCC steering committees in determining the best way to connect landscape level efforts with on-the-ground conservation. The BLM will remain engaged in developing the partnership and providing an avenue for development of needed landscape level conservation science, such as through conducting REAs.

The LCCs and the BLM's landscape approach are complementary efforts that are working together to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of conservation actions. The LCC provides a forum to share information, leverage resources, and identify data gaps and questions. This forum is vital to the REAs, which will integrate and build on Western Governors Association initiatives, state forestry assessments, and landscape work from federal and non-federal partners. Assessment products are then available to the partnership to help inform decisions.

In response to landscape level stressors (invasive species, wildland fire, development, climate change, etc.), increased cooperation and adequate tools are needed to identify priority areas for landscape conservation and prioritize science needed to manage lands appropriately to maintain sustainable and diverse communities of fish, wildlife, and plants. Montana/Dakotas BLM recognizes the importance of cooperative conservation and adaptive management and will utilize the latest science and techniques to manage landscapes for multiple uses.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Development of landscape level datasets and tools will help guide the BLM in prioritizing and locating restoration efforts through programs such as Healthy Landscapes, in addition to managing National Landscape Conservation Units to preserve their ecological values. Opportunities for partnerships in development of the REAs and LCCs will help effectively develop and implement landscape scale conservation strategies.

CONTACT:

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RENEWABLE ENERGY

SUMMARY:

The Montana/Dakotas BLM has established a “virtual” renewable energy team (RET) to facilitate renewable energy projects crossing BLM-administered land. Section 211 of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 tasked the Department of the Interior with approving non-hydropower renewable energy projects on the public lands producing at least 10,000 megawatts of electricity by 2015. Federal land administered by the BLM across the West will play a crucial role in achieving this goal.

BACKGROUND:

The RET in the Montana/Dakotas consists of two positions in the state office (project manager, tribal coordinator) and two positions in the Dillon Field Office. The Dillon positions provide support to the Mountain States Transmission Intertie (MSTI) 500 kV Transmission Line Project, an application filed by Northwestern Energy in 2008 with the capacity to serve future renewable energy generators.

Montana and the Dakotas contain high quality wind resources for renewable energy development based on wind resource ratings developed by the National Renewable Energy Lab (NREL). Wind energy development is receiving a high degree of interest, especially given the current tax credit climate, though efforts are currently focused on private lands.

In the past, right-of-way grants for site testing and monitoring on BLM lands have been issued in the vicinity of Bridger, Whitehall, and Glasgow, Mont. Except for an application to develop a wind farm in Valley County near Glasgow which was eventually withdrawn, none of the other test sites have resulted in a wind development application. The South Dakota Field Office is currently processing a wind testing and monitoring application for public lands east of Belle Fourche. Future applications for testing and/or development may increase depending on resolution of transmission issues; establishment of carbon credit legislation; stabilization of other federal renewable energy policy; and improvement in the economic and investment climate.

Work is ongoing to engage tribal groups in potential renewable energy development on BLM-administered lands. The state office is assisting several planning efforts across Montana/Dakotas BLM lands to ensure renewable energy objectives (especially wind) are considered at the land use plan stage. Efforts are also underway to identify public lands that have fewer constraints than those containing priority sagebrush habitats, bald and golden eagle issues, visual resource management constraints, or other issues of concern. The Montana/Dakotas is also expecting to pilot a competitive process in the near future pending WO direction whereby areas in the Havre and Butte field offices would be offered to industry for a preference to submit a right-of-way application for identified lands.

Industry interest in developing renewable energy projects on federal lands is expected to increase as private land development is completed and demand for high potential wind areas grows. The BLM anticipates working with a variety of partners in the private, local, state, and federal arenas to promote responsible development and timely review of applications in order to balance use of public land values, protect critical resources, and still achieve renewable energy goals.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

The Montana/Dakotas BLM supports renewable energy development to help reduce U.S. dependence on unstable foreign supply sources. The BLM will process right-of-way applications for wind energy development, including site testing and monitoring of potential areas, and applications for transmission lines to support interconnectivity with the electric grid and the transport of renewable energy generation. Public interest is high, and applications are often controversial as impacts to viewsheds, wildlife, and social and economic development issues are considered and addressed.

CONTACTS:

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PUMPKIN CREEK RANCH AND RECREATION AREA

SUMMARY:

The Pumpkin Creek Ranch and Recreation Area (RRA) land exchange was finalized November 17, 2009. The exchange created a contiguous block of federal land covering approximately 20,556 acres, 15 miles south of Miles City, Mont. In total, the BLM acquired 14,037 acres and disposed of 15,572 acres, including 56 isolated parcels in Custer and Carter counties. The Pumpkin Creek Ranch and Recreation Area land exchange objective: "Provide the public with much needed hunting and recreational opportunities near Miles City, and provide the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with increased habitat and range management opportunities."

BACKGROUND:

The Pumpkin Creek RRA is being managed under an interim management plan while the Miles City Field Office revises its resource management plan (RMP). Once final, the RMP will provide guidance for permitted/allocated activities and resource uses on the Pumpkin Creek RRA. Until that time, all activities or uses that require a BLM permit are not being approved. Approving a permitted use while the RMP process is underway could conflict or appear to conflict with the analysis in regards to future uses of the Pumpkin Creek RRA.

The Miles City Field Office requested input from the Eastern Montana Resource Advisory Council (RAC) and other collaborators for development of a preferred alternative for the RMP, which specifically includes the Pumpkin Creek Ranch and Recreation Area. Additionally, the RAC is being asked to explore opportunities in the development of a working group to assist drafting a comprehensive, multiple-use Pumpkin Creek Ranch and Recreation Area Management Plan. The creation of the working group would occur once the Draft RMP is available to the public.

Currently the Pumpkin Creek RRA Interim Management Plan provides for public recreational opportunities, motorized travel on existing two track roads/trails, and habitat maintenance such as stream restoration and wildfire suppression. Several activities and accomplishments have occurred since completion of the land exchange. The area was used to host to the 2009 National Public Lands Day, Montana Youth Range Days, a Pheasants Forever meeting/tour, and several BLM/RAC group tours. The BLM's accomplishments include: installation of eight low-maintenance cattle guards; creation of four graveled parking areas with map boxes; boundary and interior interpretive signing; noxious weed control; numerous hours of hunter patrol, visitor contacts, and public education; riparian inventory on approximately four miles of stream; and around 1,660 acres of cultural inventory, including the recording of 14 new cultural resource sites.

More recent accomplishments include a Standards and Guidelines Assessment for Rangeland Health that occurred in June 2011. The BLM assessed both the riparian and upland heath of the Pumpkin Creek RRA. The results of the assessment are currently being summarized. The Miles City Field Office planned to plant several miles of Pumpkin Creek with cottonwood, willow and other root stock trees and shrubs in the spring of 2011; however, due to the severe weather and flooding, most of the planting did not occur. Planting is planned for spring 2012. Finally, because of the spring flooding and erosion, the Pumpkin Creek RRA was closed to vehicular traffic until conditions improved. The ranch has since re-opened, but several roads remain closed due to disrepair that poses a risk to public health and safety.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Issues relating to access to public lands, recreation trends, agricultural needs, and commercial activities such as outfitting have placed emphasis on providing increased opportunities for the long-term public benefit. Management of the area for multiple-use objectives will benefit surrounding communities and visiting recreationists well into the future.

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MONTANA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD (MTARNG) WITHDRAWAL AT LIMESTONE HILLS TRAINING AREA

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Army Corps of Engineers (COE) has filed an application on behalf of the Montana Army National Guard (MTARNG) and the Department of Defense/Army (DOA) to withdraw and segregate from mineral entry approximately 20,000 acres of BLM-administered land about three miles west of the Missouri River near Townsend in Broadwater County, Montana. The proposed withdrawal is for MTARNG to perform military training exercises and live firing.

ISSUES:

The MTARNG has used the Limestone Hills area since the 1950's under special land use permits. In 1984, the BLM issued a 30-year right-of-way (ROW) to authorize the use. Eighty-eight percent of the range is administered by the BLM, with the remainder under state and private ownership. Live fire training at the range has included helicopter, tank, artillery, mortar and Bradley infantry vehicle gunnery. The types of weaponry ranged from small arms to 155 mm artillery, all of which have been fired into the impact area. Military training over the years has resulted in unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination, particularly within the interior 5,000-acre impact area, though UXO has also been recovered outside that area. In 1993, COE experts determined that the area south of the 2.75-inch rocket safety fan was "widely contaminated" with UXO. Based on BLM policy, the Butte Field Office implemented an emergency closure of the impact area. The BLM advised the MTARNG that its ROW for the range will not be renewed upon expiration in 2014, and the appropriate authority for continued military use of the area and transfer of jurisdiction to DOA would be a withdrawal that can only be authorized by Congress.

Continental Lime (now Graymont Western U.S., Inc.) filed mining claim locations on public lands within the ROW area in the early 1980s and operated a limestone mine at the north end of the range in 1981. In 1992, and again in 1995, Graymont filed mining plan amendments resulting in an approved expansion of its operations further into the rocket firing fan area. In a memorandum of agreement (MOA) developed in February 2005, the MTARNG agreed to clear UXO from the expansion area so that Graymont could continue mining under the current safety plan. The safety plan has been approved by the Department of Defense Explosives Safety Bureau, which must release the area for mining before the BLM can authorize exploration. Graymont located 36 additional mining claims in September 2003 and in 2006 filed a plan of operations to expand farther south into the training range. The EIS for this expansion was completed in January 2008. The BLM and Montana DEQ signed the ROD on October 7, 2010 approving the Modified Pit Backfill Alternative for the mine expansion. Graymont is concerned that the current rate of UXO clearance may not meet its mining needs, and that the MOA in place may not address current issues in the area. Work continues on an updated MOU.

If Congress enacts legislation to withdraw the area, administration of the land will transfer from BLM to DOA, with ultimate land management falling to the MTARNG (state agency) by lease from the COE. The Montana State Historic Preservation Office and the MTARNG have developed an agreement to address how Sec. 106 consultation will occur under state management.

BACKGROUND:

The project legislative environmental impact statement (LEIS) has been completed. Alternative 3 is the agencies' (MTARNG and BLM) preferred alternative. Previous activities included the completion of public scoping for the LEIS, including a working group process, and the publication of a notice of proposed withdrawal in the Federal Register on August 7, 2007, which closed the land for up to two years from settlement, sale, location, or entry under the general land laws, including the mining laws. The original segregation period for the legislative withdrawal expired August 6, 2009. A Notice of Proposed Withdrawal and Opportunity for Public Meeting for an administrative withdrawal was published September 28, 2010, to protect the land during the legislative process. This segregates the land for a two-year period during which reports required for the public land order will be prepared. The reports and the public land order package for this withdrawal will be submitted for approval prior to the end of the two-year segregation period. When the public land order is approved, the land will be withdrawn for five years to protect the current uses pending approval of legislation. The land will remain open to mineral leasing.

The LEIS Findings and Recommendations were submitted to the BLM Director April 24, 2009, but final approval rests with Congress. Further review of the draft legislation is on hold until the military publishes a notice of availability for the LEIS and discussions are held with Graymont.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high. The withdrawal would affect county PILT payments, current and future mining operations, and recreationists/hunters and could impact several grazing allotments depending on how the management plan for the firing range is structured. There is also potential for the validity of some of the mining claims to be affected by the withdrawal.

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